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University of Minnesota

Research Report No. 103

AN ANALYSIS OF THE INCIDENCE OF SPECIAL CLASS PLACEMENT: THE MASSES ARE BURGEONING

Bob Algozzine, James E. Ysseldyke, and Sandra Christenson

iRLD

Institute for Research on Learning Disabilities

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December, 1982

Abstract

Incidence figures for special education placement in a sample of 94 U.S. school districts were calculated. During the 1977-78, 1978-79, and 1979-80 school years, about 5% of the students were referred and evaluated; 3% were placed in special education programs. Wide variation was evident in the incidence figures for individual school districts, with some reporting placement incidence as high as 21% of the school population. The results are viewed as evidence of a need for proactive thinking in special education with regard to a reasonable rate of growth relative to the likelihood of continued reductions in financial support.

An Analysis of the Incidence of Special Class Placement:

The Masses are Burgeoning

Schools are institutions established by society to instill in children its beliefs and knowledge base. It is clear that either schools fail to educate significant numbers of students, or significant numbers of students fail to profit sufficiently from schooling (Copperman, 1978; Silberman, 1970; Washington Research Project, 1974; Ysseldyke & Algozzine, 1982). A variety of approaches have evolved as methods for helping schools cope with the failure of America's school children; special education is but one of these alternatives (Ysseldyke & Algozzine, 1982).

A significant number of America's failing school-aged children are provided special education. The U. S. Department of Education (1980) addressed the question of how many children are receiving services:

> According to the most recent child count (conducted in the States and Territories each December 1), some 4.03 million handicapped children ages 3 through 21 were receiving special education and related services under the combined programs of PL 89-313 and PL 94-142 during the 1979-80 school year. Based on this figure, special education and related services are now being provided to more than 9.5 percent of the children enrolled in schools. The number of children served under PL 94-142 alone has surpassed 3.8 million.
>
> That means increases of 117,000 in number of handicapped children ages 3 through 21 being served this year as compared to last year under the combined programs, about 259,000 during the past two years, and nearly 328,000 since the 1976-77 school year, when the first child count was made. At the time of that count the States were providing special education and related services to 8.2 percent of children enrolled in the public schools. The figure for the 1979-80 school year was 9.5 percent--an increase that has occurred at the same time that public school enrollments as a whole in the United States declined

> by an estimated 6.2 percent, or by almost 2.78 million children. (pp. 17-18)

The report goes on to point out that "the majority of children between the ages of 3 and 21 being served in school year 1979-80 were either learning disabled (32 percent of the total) speech impaired (29.5 percent), or mentally retarded (22 percent)" (p. 18) and that the largest increases occurred in the categories of learning disabled and seriously emotionally disturbed. The authors of the report believe that "the increase in services for emotionally disturbed children is particularly noteworthy, since these children traditionally have been among the least served" (p. 18). However, they did not point out that the federal government recently provided incentives for identification/classification (i.e., counting) of seriously emotionally disturbed children.

Special education is BIG business. The increases in numbers of students identified have been accompanied by increases in the amount of money spent in educating exceptional children. Federal appropriations under Public Law 94-142 doubled from fiscal year 1977 to 1978; over 800 million dollars was allocated in 1979 (see Table 1). Of course, the federal government does not give away money; a significant amount is routed to states by congressionally mandated formulas based on numbers of children served:

> States which implement PL 94-142 provisions are provided financial support in the form of a formula grant based on the number of handicapped children ages 3 through 21 they report serving, together with the national average per pupil expenditure. (U.S. Department of Education, 1980, p. 18, emphasis added)

Insert Table 1 about here

Public policy with regard to handicapped students has created a growing alternative educational system. Over 4 million students (i.e., 9.5% of the school population) received special education in federally supported programs during the 1979-1980 school year; the cost of the federal support approached one billion dollars and represented approximately "12 percent of the average per-pupil expenditure for each handicapped child served" (U. S. Department of Education, 1980, p. 19). The present rate of growth, fueled by powerful incentives (e.g., money), should be cause for concern among professionals in special education. In fact, unless we develop a proactive stance with regard to the question of an appropriate and reasonable size for our system, we may find ourselves in an awkward position. What do we do with the burgeoning system if the money is directed elsewhere? Clearly, the money has had an impact, albeit not always directly traceable to students (cf. Donaldson & Stephens, 1979a, 1979b, 1979c; Haywood, 1979; Kauffman, 1980). We believe that proaction should originate from research that describes the state-of-the-art rather than from theory or ill-guided personal opinions.

The purpose of this research was to identify the incidence of special education service in a sample of school districts during the 1977-78, 1978-79, and 1979-80 school years. The compilation of this information, taken with prevalence estimates for the same years, was considered to be necessary as a first step in identifying the state-

of-the-art. To our knowledge, no incidence figures of this nature are available except by interpolation from prevalance estimates; these figures are, of course, confounded by our lack of knowledge of the decrement (cure or exit by age or death) rates in the special population.

Method

Subjects

Data relative to the numbers of students referred, evaluated, and placed in special classes were obtained from 94 special education directors from 37 states. No data were received from 13 states: Arkansas, Delaware, Georgia, Hawaii, Kentucky, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, and Utah. The number of special education directors responding from each of the 37 states ranged from one to five.

The respondents were distributed fairly evenly across U. S. regions identified by the Bureau of Census. Twenty-two percent were from the northeast region, 29% from the north central region, 27% from the south region, and 22% from the west region. Over half of the sample designated their community as rural (55%), while 19% and 26% described their community as urban and suburban, respectively.

Procedure

A postcard survey was sent to a national sample of school district directors of special education. The postcard requested demographic and referral/placement information. Respondents were asked to indicate the state in which they were located, the number of students in the school district, and the type of community represented

(i.e., urban, suburban, or rural). Referral/placement information was addressed in three questions: (a) how many students were referred for psychoeducational evaluation? (b) how many referred students were evaluated? (c) how many referred students received special education services? Directors were asked to provide data for three academic years: 1977-78, 1978-79, and 1979-80.

A letter explaining the purpose of the study and a postcard were mailed in January 1981 to special education directors randomly selected from a computerized national list or a state provided list. Directors from seven states were not included on the computerized list; therefore, these names were obtained from each state department of education. The number of surveys sent to each state corresponded to the number of representatives in the U. S. Congress, resulting in an initial mailing of 435 postcards. Each letter returned due to change of address was substituted with a letter to another director randomly selected from the same state.

After six weeks, 51 postcards were returned with correctly coded information. This number was considered insufficient. Therefore, a decision was made to attempt to secure data from at least two directors per state. A second mailing (N = 315) was undertaken based on the need to fulfill this requirement. For each state, the directors were selected randomly from remaining names on the original lists. Specific criteria were followed for determining the number mailed per state. If no postcards had been returned from a state, six were sent in the second mailing; if one postcard had been returned, four were sent in the follow-up; and if a state had returned two

postcards, two were sent. In addition, due to the low return rate on the original mailing, a statement requesting return of the postcard even if the data were unavailable was stapled to each of the 315 postcards in the second mailing.

Data Analysis

While prevalence refers to the total number of cases of a disease, disorder, or disability present in a population group during a specific time interval (usually one year), incidence is the number of new cases occurring in a population during a specified interval of time (Kramer, 1975). For each director's responses, the numbers of students referred, evaluated, and placed were divided by the total school district population to yield three incidence figures for the 1977-78, 1978-79, and 1979-80 school years. The average incidence reported by the 94 directors was obtained for the total sample; data also were broken down by community type and geographic region. A descriptive data display was considered appropriate for this research; all figures were converted to percentages to facilitate interpretation.

Results

The return rate of the postcards was 22%. Of the 164 returned postcards, 35 were returned blank, 12 provided partial information (e.g., only placement data), 23 were completed inaccurately, and 94 provided the requested information accurately. Two factors influenced the return rate. Many directors reported that they do not have access to these data; others completed the postcards inaccurately by giving data on the total number of students enrolled in special education

(e.g., 415 referred, 400 evaluated, 3219 served). Only the 94 accurate sets of data were analyzed.

The relative numbers of students who were referred, evaluated, and placed in the sample states are indicated in Tables 2 and 3; ranges of percentages also are indicated. In the total group of respondents, approximately 5% of the school district population was referred and evaluated during the target school years. Minor variations in these figures were evident in different community types and geographic regions; however, very large ranges were evident in these figures.

The highest percentages of the school district population for students referred and evaluated were reported by some directors in the Western region districts and suburban districts. Individual directors in these areas indicated that almost one-third of their school district populations were referred and evaluated during 1979-80. The average incidence of placement (i.e., number of referred students placed) was consistently 3% per year; again, only minor variation was evident in data broken down by communities and geographic regions. However, large variation existed in the data reported by individual districts (e.g., at least one district reported a placement incidence above 20%). Again, individual directors reporting the highest incidence rates were in the Western regions and schools districts classified as suburban.

Insert Tables 2 and 3 about here

Discussion

During the 1976-77 school year, the states were providing "special education and related services to 8.2 percent of children enrolled in the public schools. The figure for the 1979-80 school year was 9.5 percent" (U.S. Department of Education, 1980, p. 18). These figures are estimates based on the states requesting federal support under PL 94-142 and other similar funding sources. The number of new cases (i.e., incidence) requiring special education services during the period from 1977 to 1980 was 3% per year in a sample of 94 school districts. We have no data on the decrement in those districts or nationally. We believe a 3% per year growth rate is dangerous.

An analysis of our data indicates that high percentages of students who are referred also are evaluated (about 92%). Similarly, referral/placement rates (i.e., 73%) are high (Algozzine, Christenson, & Ysseldyke, in press). Considering the state-of-the-art in assessment/classification decision-making practices, this should come as no surprise. The major problems in current practices have been identified and discussed in detail elsewhere (cf. Ysseldyke & Algozzine, 1982). In general, they are based on logically fallacious grounds, and definitions are woefully inadequate by scientific standards; psychoeducational decision making in special education has been called "scandalous" by some (Scriven, 1981).

Although the representativeness of our sample is unknown, it is clear that in some school districts, large numbers of students are referred, evaluated, and placed in special education programs. The system appears to be driven by federal incentives that require very

little in terms of accountability (e.g., each student must have an individualized education program, but no control over its quality is evident in practice) or justification of need (e.g., current system pays for numbers of students in specific categories).

Data were provided on the numbers of new cases during three school years; data have not been collected on the numbers of terminated students. The system has concentrated on eligibility criteria; however, exit criteria are important too. Certainly it would be unethical to terminate a "less needy" student due to a district's high incidence rate. While teams must address eligibility and exit criteria for special education, efforts also must be channeled toward improving mainstream instruction. We believe it is time to address the question of where we are going before we get there and are unable to come back.

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Footnote

Bob Algozzine is also a Professor of Special Education at the University of Florida, Gainesville. The authors wish to thank V. Vaughan for professional assistance in the preparation of this manuscript.

Table 1

Federal Appropriations Under PL 94-142[a]

Fiscal Year in Which Funds Are Appropriated[b]	Average Per Pupil Expenditure	Number of Children (Millions)	Amount Appropriated (Millions of Dollars)	Average Allocation Per Child	Total Amount Allocated (Millions of Dollars)
1977	$1,430	3.41	$315	$ 73[c]	$254
1978	1,561	3.55	503[d]	159[c]	564[e]
1979	1,738	3.69	804	218	804
1980	1,900	3.80	874.5	230	--

[a]This information was reproduced from the U. S. Department of Education Second Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of Public Law 94-142: The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1982).

[b]The funds are actually distributed during the following year.

[c]Because of the hold-harmless provision, the average allocation is somewhat higher than the maximum amount authorized per child by use of the allocation formula.

[d]This figure includes a $465 million appropriation and a $38 million supplemental appropriation.

[e]This figure includes $63 million that was not obligated from the 1977 appropriation for which carryover authority was given.

Table 2

Percentage of School District Population Referred, Evaluated, and Placed for the Total Sample and by Community

	1977-78	1978-79	1979-80
Total Sample			
Referred	4 (0-15)	5 (1-24)	5 (0-30)
Evaluated	4 (0-15)	5 (1-24)	5 (0-30)
Placed	3 (0-14)	3 (1-19)	3 (0-21)
Rural Districts			
Referred	4 (0-12)	5 (1-16)	5 (0-20)
Evaluated	3 (0-12)	4 (1-16)	5 (0-20)
Placed	3 (0-9)	3 (1-10)	3 (0-11)
Urban Districts			
Referred	6 (2-15)	7 (1-14)	7 (1-15)
Evaluated	5 (1-15)	6 (1-14)	5 (1-13)
Placed	4 (1-14)	4 (1-13)	4 (1-9)
Suburban Districts			
Referred	5 (1-12)	5 (1-24)	6 (1-30)
Evaluated	4 (1-12)	5 (1-24)	5 (1-30)
Placed	3 (1-10)	4 (1-19)	4 (1-21)

Table 3

Percentage of School District Populations Referred, Evaluated, and Placed for the Total Sample and by Geographic Region

	1977-78	1978-79	1979-80
Total Sample			
Referred	4 (0-15)	5 (1-24)	5 (0-30)
Evaluated	4 (0-15)	5 (1-24)	5 (0-30)
Placed	3 (0-14)	3 (1-19)	3 (0-21)
Northeast Region			
Referred	5 (1-11)	5 (1-10)	5 (0-11)
Evaluated	4 (1-11)	4 (1-10)	5 (0-10)
Placed	3 (0-10)	3 (1-9)	3 (0-7)
Northcentral Region			
Referred	4 (1-12)	5 (1-16)	5 (2-20)
Evaluated	3 (1-12)	4 (1-16)	5 (2-20)
Placed	2 (0-9)	3 (1-10)	3 (1-11)
South Region			
Referred	4 (1-8)	5 (1-9)	5 (1-10)
Evaluated	4 (1-8)	4 (1-9)	4 (1-10)
Placed	3 (1-7)	4 (1-8)	3 (1-9)
West Region			
Referred	4 (0-15)	6 (1-24)	6 (1-30)
Evaluated	4 (0-15)	6 (1-24)	6 (1-30)
Placed	3 (0-14)	4 (1-19)	4 (1-21)

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